Speech for Vic Toews, Q.C.
Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada
Canadian Centre for Abuse Awareness
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Introduction

Thank you (MC), for your kind introduction.

I would like to express my appreciation to the Canadian Centre for Abuse Awareness for the opportunity to be here this evening, and for organizing this event in memory of Holly Jones.

For those here tonight who knew Holly, this evening will probably bring back memories of the talented and special girl that she was.

Holly's family was forever changed in May of 2003. And an entire country felt their grief.

And through organizations like the CCAA and their projects, they and many others who were touched by this tragedy are taking action to protect other children from child abuse and help adult survivors of abuse.

We know that when abuse occurs, the entire community—family, friends, and neighbours—feels its impact. Many of us know someone who has been abused—or may even have been victims themselves. So we know the psychological and emotional damage it can cause.

This evening is about protecting children from abuse, and about increasing awareness of child abuse. And Canada's new government is ready to lend support to victims, and at the same time prevent further crimes and take a tough but balanced approach to offenders.

A Stronger Voice for Victims

It is important for all of us to play a role in helping change attitudes, raise awareness, and meet the basic needs of victims of abuse.

But we cannot promote victim issues if we are content to simply maintain the programs that we already have. We must work together to strengthen the voices of victims of crime, listen to their concerns, and respond to them.

We continue to support the Victims Fund. The Fund has been expanded to financially help victims attend National Parole Board hearings.

These hearings are important opportunities for victims. They give them a chance to voice their views and concerns. Or victims may simply choose to be present to observe and be informed about the status of the offender who has victimized them.

I am currently pursuing the possibility of establishing a national Victims' Ombudsman's Office. There is a clear need for a strong and independent voice for victims of crime within the federal corrections system and justice system. An Ombudsman's Office could serve that purpose for all victims of crime.

I know that the provinces and territories provide the front-line assistance to victims and assist victims to participate in criminal proceedings. As a former Minister of Justice in Manitoba, this is familiar ground for me. At the federal level, we will discuss with the provinces and territories the possibility of increasing our support for these efforts to assist victims.

Canada 's new government will continue to make victims of crime – their needs, their priorities – the focus of the justice system.

Tackling Crime: Progress So Far

Ladies and gentlemen, on this and many other issues, our government has had a busy and productive eight months in office. We have assembled a talented and diverse team, dedicated to getting things done for Canadian families and taxpayers. Taxes and waste have been cut. We are unveiling concrete steps to clean up the environment and protect the health and well-being of Canadians. At home, Canada is united, and abroad, our country is once again a leader.

As Minister of Justice, I am working closely with my colleague, the Minister of Public Safety, Stockwell Day, to tackle crime. We are delivering for Canadians by making Canada's streets and communities safer.

During the last session of Parliament, Canada's new government acted on our commitment to get tough on violent crime.

I know that many of you in this room believe, as I do, that the issue of violent crime has now become a primary concern for Canadians. Clearly, changes are needed in our justice system if we are to build the safer, healthier society that Canadians want and once enjoyed.

The time has come for us to toughen our approach to combating this growing danger. Violent offenders and other serious offenders deserve more than a slap on the wrist.

Two of the bills we introduced will ensure that serious crimes are met with serious consequences.

One bill proposes to prohibit the use of conditional sentences—including house arrest—for serious violent and sexual offences. Our changes will reserve conditional sentences for crimes that are less serious and for criminals who pose a low risk to community safety. Because criminals must be held to account. They must face punishment that matches the severity of their crime.

The other bill we introduced will toughen the mandatory minimum penalty sentences for crimes involving firearms. Under this bill, serious offences involving firearms will be subject to the very tough sentences they deserve.

We backed up these commitments with funding. In the 2006 Budget, we set aside money to recruit more RCMP personnel and federal prosecutors. We are expanding the RCMP Training Academy. And we are strengthening the National DNA Data Bank.

Of course, community safety also involves protecting our most vulnerable citizens. Our most recent piece of legislation, the Age of Protection Bill, aims to do that.

This June, we introduced a bill that will raise the age at which youth can consent to sexual activity from 14 to 16 years. A five year close-in-age exception is included, so that consensual teenage

sexual activity is not criminalized.

With these reforms, children and young people will be better protected from adult sexual predators. No longer will it be legal for a 35- or 40-year-old to have consensual sex with a 14- or 15-year-old.

With the rise of new technologies such as the Internet, it has become more important than ever to increase the safety and security of Canadian families. By raising the age of protection by two years, the Government is targeting sexual predators who prey upon society's most vulnerable individuals.

This new law will bring Canada's age of consent into line with many other like-minded countries. And all of the provinces and territories are behind this change too, as part of the fight against sexual exploitation of children.

When I introduced this bill, I was proud to have the support of Ottawa Police Chief Vince Bevan, as well as Beyond Borders, a group committed to ending the exploitation of children the world over.

Paul Gillespie, formerly of the Toronto Police Child Exploitation Unit, lent his support too. He and his former colleagues have been on the front lines battling sexual predators who prey on children. They've brought them to justice.

They know that this bill is a common-sense measure to protect kids. It's an honour to give them another tool in their fight.

Last but certainly not least, the CCAA has been a very outspoken supporter of this legislation. And, for that, I am appreciative.

Canada 's new government also recognizes the importance of crime prevention. We will address the causes of crime before it has a chance to take root, especially with young people. We are supporting community-based programs that can keep youth at risk from falling prey to the culture of guns, gangs and drugs.

In areas threatened by gun and gang violence, we are working with other levels of government, police, and community leaders on programs that reach out to young people. We announced funding of $20 million in the last budget to support community-based programs that can provide youths at risk with positive opportunities and help them make good choices. We will continue to support solutions to help end the cycle of violence that can lead to broken communities and broken lives.

Continuing the Commitment

During this session of Parliament, we will continue with our commitment. We know that we need to remain vigilant. We must make sure that there are effective measures to safeguard our communities—and in particular our children. We must strive to make mechanisms that already work, work better. Like the national sex offender registry.

But Canadian families and children have the right to be protected, to the highest degree possible, against dangerous and high-risk offenders.

In the last election, we made a commitment to strengthen the law when it comes to serious repeat violent and sexual offenders. We said that if someone has been convicted three times of violent or sexual crimes, they should be presumed a dangerous offender. They have shown no regard for the safety and security of their fellow citizens, or their communities.

After events this summer, all levels of government were called upon to re-assess dangerous offender laws. We have heard these calls. We share the concern. And we are acting. I intend to introduce legislation very soon that fulfills our election commitment.

Conclusion

Canadians have told us what they want from government and what their priorities are. When it comes to community safety, this government is making your priorities, **our** priorities. In the election campaign we said we'd tackle crime. In eight months, we followed through. And we will continue to do so this fall.

In closing, ladies and gentlemen, I want to thank the CCAA once again for inviting me to speak to you today. I thank you again for the work you do in support of victims of abuse. I salute your efforts and look forward to working with you to further strengthen our justice system and build a safer, more secure country.

Thank you.

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